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Distinction Paper

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Dance as an Expression of Faith: Balanchine and Me

My project, *Dance as an Expression of Faith: Balanchine and Me*, was inspired by my ruminations about the role of my religion, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, in dance, my passion. The inspiration for this project was from Dr. Hannah Kosstrin's History/Theory/Literature 2 class at The Ohio State University within the dance department: we were discussing Anna Sokolow's Jewishness and how it impacted her work and choreography. It made me consider the role of my own religion, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, not only in my life and in my own work, but also within the dance field in general. I began to wonder if there were prominent dancers or choreographers who were Orthodox Christian and how Orthodoxy may have influenced dance.

My project consisted of two parts. The first part was my travels to New York City to conduct archival research about George Balanchine, a prominent Orthodox Christian choreographer and founder of the New York City Ballet. I received the Arts Undergraduate Research Grant in support of my traveling. This research resulted in a 15-page paper, titled *George Balanchine and the Church: Religion Permeating Dance*, analyzing Balanchine's work and how the Orthodox faith influenced and appeared in his work. The second part of the project was a creative process, which consisted of choreographing and performing a solo after researching Balanchine's work. These project halves were connected by my second research question: How can I explore Orthodoxy represented onstage in my own context as a female contemporary dancer, and how is my exploration similar to or different from Balanchine's?

This project hinged on traveling to the New York City Public Library. At the library, I listened to interviews with Balanchine and watched documentation of his choreography that is not available anywhere else. I discovered that many critics have alluded to a deep spirituality in Balanchine's work, with statements, such as from Claudia Roth Pierpont, that it looks in his work as if "the spirit is fully embodied" (Pierpont 9), or from Jonathan Cott that he seems to "have a soul understanding" (Cott, disc 1, 30:58) of Stravinsky's music, which Balanchine frequently used in his choreography. While there are many allusions to spirituality and the soul within the current critical literature on Balanchine, very few—if any—of the critics who have written about him prior to my research have acknowledged that he was a very religious man. Most people do not even know that he was an Orthodox Christian. The absence of Orthodoxy in the current commentary on his works is palpable.

During my research at NYPL, I found an interview with Balanchine conducted by Jonathan Cott. In this interview, Balanchine spoke at great length about growing up Orthodox: his uncle and grandfather, who were priests and who Balanchine wanted to emulate in this regard; the music of the Church, which he greatly loved; and the candlelight that illuminates the faces of the saints in the icons. I found that these themes frequently appeared in his choreography in some way or another. He lit a piece from below to make his dancers appear as saints. He frequently portrayed reverence onstage. The muses in his ballet *Apollo* danced as if they were singing, likely a reference to Balanchine's love for the musical tradition of the Church. He also highlighted his female dancers, who often seem to be embodying a saint's figure—in *The Unanswered Question*, this evokes the reverence the Orthodox have for the Mother of God.

Not only did Balanchine put Orthodox beliefs onstage, but he also attempted to communicate them verbally to the critics he spoke with. In the interview, Balanchine becomes

audibly frustrated when Jonathan Cott does not understand something that Balanchine is explaining about his uncle becoming a monk. Although he allowed his audiences to view his ballets and leave with whatever interpretations they produced, it is clear from this interview alone how important Orthodoxy was to Balanchine's life, and Balanchine told Cott, in his own words, that Orthodoxy greatly influenced his work. The conclusion of my research paper is that one of Balanchine's main goals with his work was to privately express his great love for his faith.

Though this goal seems relevant in all of his work to some extent, the most notable was the final ballet that Balanchine put onstage, *Adagio Lamentoso*:¹ a ceremonial, straightforward depiction of the Orthodox Christian faith through dance. The corps de ballets wore angel wings and held chalices like the ones we receive communion from. Three dancers in white represented the Holy Trinity. The initiation of Balanchine's uncle into monasticism, which he discussed in the interview with Cott, can be seen in the black cloaks used for some of the costumes. At the end, a child in white holds a single candle over the black cross on the floor made by the dancers' bodies, representing Christ's triumph over death in a clear reference to the Orthodox Christian midnight Easter service, where a priest exits from the altar in the darkened church with a single lit candle, spreading the light to the candles of the faithful present.

¹ The discussion of *Adagio Lamentoso* is from my observation of *Symphony patheticque. Fourth movement* [videorecording] / [presented by] New York City Ballet; choreography by George Balanchine; music by Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky (Symphony no. 6, fourth movement, *adagio lamentoso*). New York Public Library. Accessed 7 Aug. 2019.

Two years after the premiere of *Adagio Lamentoso*, which was performed only twice, Balanchine passed away from a brain virus that had been plaguing him for years, affecting his coordination and his ability to focus (Altman). It is likely that he knew that it would be the last ballet that he would create, which only adds to its significance as a public and private expression of his faith. The last ballet he chose to craft and put onstage for the consumption of his audience was an onstage representation of the Orthodox Christian faith. For the man who wanted to be a priest and ended up a world-renowned choreographer, it is no wonder that he chose this to be his last onstage statement, reminding his audience of our beliefs—that there is more to life after death and that we are all awaiting our Savior.

This research offers a new lens through which to view Balanchine. Typically, Balanchine is discussed as an abstract choreographer who was often inspired by music, particularly Stravinsky's pieces. However, in examining Balanchine's works within the context of Orthodox Christian beliefs, it becomes apparent that there was much more going on in his creative process than merely abstract movement and inspiration from music. The implication of this discovery is that despite Balanchine's popularity as a pinnacle figure in the development of American ballet, there is a whole world of analysis of his works that has yet to be conducted. This gap in the research must be filled if dance historians and performers want to fully understand or embody Balanchine's ballets. Through hearing Balanchine's frustration in the interview with Cott who misunderstood his statements about Orthodoxy, one cannot help but wonder how he felt about critics, historians, and viewers overlooking such a large part of his life and work.

My attempt to fill this research gap informed the choreographic process of creating my solo. When I started choreographing my own work, *Adagio Lamentoso* had left a strong impression on me and I wanted to try making something similar, insofar as representing a

narrative about Orthodoxy or elements of Orthodoxy onstage, just as Balanchine had. However, I found this approach very restrictive. I was suddenly worried about encompassing the entirety of the faith in five minutes onstage and beginning to pantomime my own life experience.

Orthodoxy is too large a concept to try to encapsulate it all inside of a piece. My creative process felt completely hindered and I grew frustrated with trying to make anything.

Once I let go of these desires to fully encompass the faith and my life experience within it, I started wondering more about choreographic device and process and became less concerned with the thematic material of my solo. This new approach aided me in generating material and not being too precious with it. When I had created some movement phrases that I could mold, things quickly fell into place. Upon allowing the work to become whatever it became instead of trying to predetermine the outcome, the themes I had been concerned with started emerging on their own—for example, falling to my knees as if in a prostration, which is a common physical movement in the Orthodox Lenten prayers and services. This emergence of the thematic material on its own is likely because Orthodoxy is so steeped into my life, my body knowledge, and my heart: instead of forcing it to emerge, I only had to allow myself to lean into my natural tendencies.

Despite the improvement in the flow of the choreographic process, I did have to give up some of my pre-conceived ideas to lean into what the piece was becoming. I wanted the solo to convey an emphasis on the peace that God gives. However, when my faculty advisor, Dr. Karen Eliot, first came into the studio to give me feedback, she said that what she saw in my movement was a hunt or a struggle, which came largely from my gaze being frequently focused on the corner. That feedback surprised me, and my initial internal response was that I did not want that to be the mood of the piece. However, when I reconsidered her feedback, the Orthodox Christian

concept of spiritual struggle came to mind: that we are constantly battling the myriad temptations thrown at us in this world and searching for even a little taste of God's wholeness and grace.

Suddenly the hunt and the struggle made sense in this context of spiritual struggle.

I decided then to emphasize the aspect of struggle in the piece, as well as controlled freedom: that through this struggle to stay on the path of spiritual growth, one can find true freedom. I did this by exploring tempo—moving from slow to fast, stopping entirely at times only to pick back up either slowly or quickly—and exploring the juxtaposition between the movement being either strained or relaxed. I also showed it by falling into and rising out of the floor, as Orthodoxy often refers to “falling into” sin and standing back up from it. Other elements of Orthodoxy showed up as well: the lifting of my arms in the imagery of the cross, repeating things in sets of three as an homage to Balanchine, and much more. The corner which my gaze had been focused on became, in my mind, the Kingdom of Heaven, which I was struggling to reach.

The music also supported the theme of spiritual struggle. Initially, my choice in music was instinctive and not based on any specific rationale. However, when asked to articulate why I wanted to use that piece of music for my work I realized what had drawn me to it. Titled *Flag of No Country* by Julia Kent, the piece consisted of multiple layers of cello. In the upper, most distinctive layer, the cello was calm and beautiful yet somehow eerie, like the surface of a dark lake. The plucking strings and sound of anxiety in the lower layers added tension and an urgency. It encapsulated the spiritual struggle, weakness, and conflict of humanity while God's grace yet remains, containing the feeling of something being both peaceful and difficult at the same time—beautiful in its complementary contradiction.

Though there were many successes and I learned much through this research, there are also weaknesses that I wish I could have addressed. The largest one is that since my time at the library was so limited, my access to Balanchine's works only lasted the duration of a few days. I watched as much as I could and tried to take very thorough notes. However, if I had had more time, I would have been able to view more and I could have been even more thorough with writing down more of the interview with Cott, more observations of the movement phrases, and been more consistent with noting down time stamps.

More than just the sheer volume of how much I could watch and listen to, I also wish that I could have returned to the material in the library throughout my process, particularly whilst writing the research paper but also while choreographing. I was mostly limited to the descriptive notes that I took and the vague impressions I tried to grasp onto as the semester progressed and my work deepened. There were movement phrases that I referenced in my research paper that I wish I could see again to describe them better. There were questions that arose later that I could not answer in my inability to return to the library. Some of those questions were as small as where a dancer's arm was during a certain phrase, but other questions were bigger, like if certain movement themes appeared in more of his works than I had been able to view. Perhaps there are benefits from these limitations as well, though—being limited to my notes forced me to not become overly detail-oriented.

As far as the implications of this research for my own career in dance, I believe that this project could be a lifelong project extended to researching other Orthodox dancers and not just Balanchine. Though I did not write down their names at the library because I was in a rush to soak up as much Balanchine material as possible, I did find other interviews with dancers listed—especially with Russian dancers—where Eastern Orthodoxy was mentioned in the

descriptive tags. It seems that there is a long line of Orthodox dancers and choreographers whose faith was central to their life and perhaps also to their work. I would like to shine a light on their stories.

Shining a light on their stories could involve writing more papers and compiling them to create a brief history of prominent Orthodox choreographers and a discussion of the Orthodox influence on dance. I want to start a conversation about this influence because it seems that it reaches far deeper than many believe and answers many research questions. For example, a question for a long time has been why Balanchine chose to light *The Unanswered Question* so strangely, and I believe it is the piece he is referencing in the interview with Jonathan Cott when he talks about lighting the dancers from below so their faces look like icons in the church.

Not only do I want to explore the history of Orthodox Christian influence on dance further, but I also want to explore the nuance of Orthodoxy more in my own work. As a choreographer, I have always sought to share my own life experiences in a way that others can empathize with. My experiences with my faith and the ways it has shaped my life are so vast and plenteous that I could probably make an entire series of works based on those experiences alone. I believe that this will help me to find my voice as a choreographer, and already has done so through the solo that I made as part of this project.

My conclusion is aided by a quote from Balanchine's spiritual father, Fr. Adrian, who gave him communion every day near his death. This quote is also how I concluded my research paper: "[Balanchine] did not become a cleric," Fr. Adrian said. "He became one of those to whom Peter in his first Epistle says the calling is given. He was called into service in order to bring beauty into the world" (Holy Fathers 1). Commenting on *Adagio Lamentoso*, Balanchine's final ballet, Fr. Adrian said, "[...] it occurred to me that very many people look on the cross as a

symbol of death. For an Orthodox Christian the cross is a prelude to eternal life [...] What mattered [in *Adagio Lamentoso*] was the victory over death which was symbolized at the end of the ballet by a child in white [...] the single source of light, a candle clutched in his hand” (Holy Fathers 4). In other words, Balanchine’s life mission was to show his love for the Church.

Balanchine showed his love for the Church primarily through making dances that referenced Orthodoxy through his aesthetic and choreographic choices. While he allowed his dances to speak for themselves, he sometimes tried to communicate his great love for the faith and how it influenced his work to interviewers, only to be angered when his love for the faith and its presence in his work was brushed aside. Through both his subtle references to Orthodoxy—movements in sets of three—and through his more obvious references, like *Adagio Lamentoso*, he left a legacy of Orthodox Christianity in dance for other young Orthodox Christian dancers to follow in his footsteps. In this legacy, I finally found a place of comfort in my own dance-making and a choreographic voice I felt proud to call my own.

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